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Postdigital aesthetics – an art of imperfection, disturbances and disintegration¹

Abstract:

The article discusses the recent phenomenon of postdigital aesthetics, with a focus on postdigital artists' preference for destructive actions, and their use of imperfection, distortion and errors. It analyses glitch art creators, using the theoretical tools proposed by Rosa Menkman and Michael Betancourt. It addresses the possible reasons for a return to analog in the postdigital age and for critical use of glitch in contemporary art. The art of glitch perhaps best epitomizes our postdigital condition and shows a discontinuous experience of reality.

Keywords: glitch art, postdigital aesthetics, neoanalog, death of computers, the end of digital

Various negations of art (anti-art and destruction art) consisting in questioning its classical vision and mission were first of all supposed to object the representation and free images from the compulsion of depiction. In my considerations over the postdigital aesthetics, I shall start from the rebellion of images which are free from the obligation to reflect, duplicate the reality, and which become independent and performative agents. From now on, their main purpose shall be their actions: disturbance, distortion and shifting the existing vision of the world. It is those images which shall constitute the postdigital landscape, create the splice, the space of co-existence of the elements of the analog and digital cultures. Apart from the phenomenon of the return of analog devices, i.e. the so-called neoanalog trend in the effectively digitalized world, the most interesting phenomenon within the new aesthetics turns out to be *glitch art*, an art based on destructive actions, fascination with defect, failure and

¹ This text was translated from Polish, originally published in: TEKSTUALIA. PALIMPSESTY LITERACKIE ARTYSTYCZNE NAUKOWE, 2(49) (2017), pp. 45-53.

unsuccessful representation. Relying mainly on Rosa Menkman's research, I wish to characterize the phenomenon of the postdigital aesthetics, highlight its negative dimension and show the inspirations which it draws from the fact of the digital reality becoming obsolete.

Rebellion of images

Throughout centuries, the traditional art has made us familiar with its affirmative character, and the creation process itself was connected with the reality: if it was directly connected with its creation, then with proving and confirming its existence. While surrounded by pieces of art, we can be sure that usually they represent, convey a number of more or less colourful and recognizable depictions or classical values, such as beauty or truth. The image then constitutes a strictly dependent, if not enslaved thing, therefore, is always artificial and secondary, it has to refer to something, it can be nothing else than a copy of its original.

Meanwhile, in the 20th century starts the period of rebellion, during which the more avant-garde images become more and more independent, and try to free themselves from their humble role, i.e. the compulsion to depict. This is the reason why they become abstract, non-figurative, and thus independent. From now on the emancipated art will not want to reflect anything, nor will it have to exemplify, show, depict or make present. This negative shift in the history of culture, which consciously gives up bringing its participants to the better, more true and beautiful worlds, gets to be called a crisis of representation or a problem of reference.

The gradual separation from images and what they represent, i.e. the process of emancipation of copy from its original dictating the conditions of its proper reproduction, has been described by Jean Baudrillard, who presents his theory of simulacra². According to this French philosopher, originally images were faithful copies of its originals; one could say there were inseparable and complementary. Unspecialized and enslaved representations did not replace the unbeatable reality – they were only able to refer and lead to it. The second stage of the emancipation of images consisted in actions of unfaithfulness, i.e. the gradual separation from the original and the purposeful departure from the truth. The even more attractive representations begin to draw the attention which is exclusively theirs, and they slowly become more interesting than what they were supposed to depict: they cover the reality to which they ought to lead in the first place. In the third stage of creating of simulacra, the depictions only pretend to be able to lead us anywhere thus simulating the existence of their

² See. Baudrillard, J. 1994. *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press.

original or source. Finally – according to Baudrillard - simulacrum constitutes the ultimate form of emancipation of images which exist independently already, each for itself and without referring its spectators to nothing but itself.

By screaming *non serviam!*, rebellious, nonfigurative images renounce their service for the benefit of the nonrepresentational reality, which they were so far supposed to justify and – through their existence – to maintain. Thus, images stop to be reflections, representations and copies, and finally freed from the duties imposed by them, start to live independently, like their own and authentic life, away from the compulsion of depicting. Henceforth our interest is diverted to the earlier hidden existence of images, and our attention is drawn to their specific desires, dilemmas, problems and hopes. This is why, contemporarily, the question what images want seems to be much more interesting than the matter of what they depict, convey and what reality they refer to³.

Postdigital reality

We have analysed the long but consistent process of the aesthetic emancipation, i.e. the liberation of the world of art from the compulsion to represent, completed with an effective instability of the opposition original - copy. The postdigital reality requires a few words of comment since it is this space where we can find rebellious images which interfere with and distort the traditional order of depiction. What was characteristic of the postdigital epoch was the unshakeable faith in the information conveyed, which – free from any imperfections and disturbances – was supposed to fight the destructive force of time. The digital culture based on the binary code seemed to be absolutely immaterial and generated the effect of immediate and unfettered availability. Its lightness and sterility was additionally increased by the minimization of medium and wireless communication, making the impression as if the flow of data were taking place with no mediation whatsoever. The new, dynamic, mobile and elusive digitality was clearly opposed to the heavy analog tradition of many hundreds of years of existence, which was not able to protect the recorded images and information from being lost, obsolete and disintegrated.

Meanwhile the digital technology, as well as the vision of future it represents, has become old and does not constitute a novelty. Therefore, in order to describe it, I have been using the past tense. Contemporarily, we live in the postdigital time, which - against the digital prophets' predictions – means that we are very likely to combine the so far juxtaposed

³ See. Mitchell, W.J.T. 2004, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago, University Of Chicago Press.

worlds, the analog with the digital one. In a nutshell, the postdigital reality means that we gladly use the old-fashioned, analog, and – one could think – forgotten – media, but we do it in a way we got used to through the newest achievements of technology, the digital media.

Florian Cramer gives a perfect example of such hybrid, digital and analog proceeding where he analyses a mem he came across in the net. In the mem, there is a photograph of a man sitting on a bench in a park, with a typewriter on his lap. It is signed „You shall not be a real hipster unless you take a typewriter to a park”⁴. Cramer reveals that the photograph depicts the American writer Christopher D. Hermelin, who by profession writes short stories outside, which then are bought by the passers-by. We are used to the sight of people typing in parks and cafes but using laptops: the sight of a typewriter might cause surprise and disturbance in the users of the digital culture. However, the analog choice of the writer who uses the old technology in a new way seems to be well-grounded, and perhaps most practical. If Hermelin decided to sit on the bench with a laptop and wireless printer, it would be much more complicated, his writing would lose its unique charm, and his efforts would be limited by the capacity of the battery, access to the Internet and the weather.

End of digitality: neoanalog

Another sign of the fact that we live in the postdigital era is the amazing popularity of the series *Thirteen Reasons Why* (*Thirteen Reasons Why*, 2017), which tells the story about a teenage girl who committed suicide (Hannah Baker). She decides to record her memories on tapes. Everyone who has contributed to her death even in the least degree, receives a set of the tapes prepared by her, and having read them they find out about the thirteen reasons which makes this secondary school girl commit suicide. The fact that she chooses the old-fashioned data carrier, her being born in the 20th century and having access to Facebook, Snapchat, all kinds of video blogs, YouTube and many other channels of contemporary communication, makes you think and ponder why.

From the digital point of view, her entrance into the analog world is directly connected with a concrete vision of death necessary in the virtual reality. The shift into the offline state, disconnection from the Internet turns out to be equal with catastrophe, apocalypse, it is a nightmare of most teenagers. Hannah, recording herself on the tapes, on one hand stresses her exceptional quality and difference so that there is no place for her in the secondary school environment, on the other she repeats the gesture of suicide as most people do not have the

⁴ Cfr. Cramer, F. 2015. *What Is “Post-digital”?* [in:] *Postdigital Aesthetics. Art, Computation and Design*, edited by Berry T.D., Dieter, M., New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 12.

cassette players anymore. If we look at her decision from the postdigital point of view, it turns out that the secondary school student is an aware participant of the non-contemporary aspects of the contemporary times, and her choice perfectly shows the way people function in the hybrid, neoanalog times.

By forcing her friends to listen to the tapes and using the paper maps with spots marked by her, Hannah introduces havoc to the orderly world so far distinguishing between the analog and digital reality. What is mingled in the series is the chronological order, the past is intertwined with the present making them difficult to separate one from another. The sequence of tenses may be discerned only when we carefully follow the aesthetics with which the film was created. The events from the past are bright and colourful which is typical of the analog culture, the present ones however have cold, blueish hues characteristic of the digital way of perception.

Hanna's usage of cassette tapes is aimed at the selective access to information, creation of intimacy, closeness and relation between the sender and the receiver she chooses. The girl thus opposes the virus-like model of spreading information, their uncontrolled multiplication, the sender's anonymity and the immediate availability of the whole content⁵. She herself falls prey to this way of passing on data when one of her intimate pictures gets in the Internet, and she is not able to control how it is increasingly passed. That is why she chooses an old-fashioned data carrier, which offers neither immediate nor entire availability of the content. In order to listen to the recorded story, one needs a great deal of time and if they want to get familiar with it, they ought to learn to live with it, i.e. its slow assimilation, from the very beginning to the very end. Also, the recording itself, with the usage of the analog technology is different, deprived of the possibility to cut, do the retouching, change and interfere with, all of which result from the subsequent processing of sound. The teenager's narration leading us throughout the whole series creates the impression of security, stability and continuity in the *instant* culture, in the world used to fragmentariness, citations, extracts and skipping of boring, uninteresting information.

Analog-digital splice

The co-existence of the analog (sound waves, magnetic field) and digital (fragments of bites, pixels) cultures, their intertwining, constitutes the postdigital landscape of the contemporary, visual culture. We can notice the increasing fascination by the analog devices,

⁵ See. Sampson, T.D. 2012. *Virality. Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

we can observe their second life, as if contemporarily they would like to be used once again, in completely new conditions and circumstances (cassette-recorder tapes, VHS, vinyls, postcards, analog photographs, even money). Not only is their usage becoming popular but also equal with the so-far favouring and overrating of digital ones.

The ideal of the digital vision of the world consisted in the consistent striving for perfection, maximal speed of transmission, immediate availability, high quality of data, durability of information and cleanliness of the transfer, i.e. eliminating of any interferences and creation of perfect communication. Today, we know that this utopic dream cannot be fulfilled. The exchange of information never takes place directly. This is why we are constantly doomed to face the distortions generated by the application of media. Information is not something existing beyond time and space, but is always connected with transformation and deformation when it is being passed⁶. The comeback of the analog culture could be perceived as the revival of the materiality so hated in the digital era, of the DIY culture, and last but not least, the conscious resignation of perfection.

The new, hybrid aesthetics stemming from the experience of mingling or the splice of the analog and digital traditions, is interested first of all in the defeat, defect, damage and the failure of the project of digitalization, it is born from their ashes and its them where it generates its inspiration from⁷. The digital era offered a quick and easy access to information, but it was permeated with the danger of radical and immediate loss of data – everyone is aware of the difference between a book flooded with the morning coffee and a laptop or smartphone. The postdigital aesthetics shall feed itself in different ways on the atmosphere of danger and accident so typical of the digital times, on the destruction lurking in hidden place, which is able to digest and devour the digitalized archive in one go⁸. Not without a reason, the main axis of the *Thirteen reasons why* is a personal catastrophe, the heroine's suicide. With bated breath, the spectators of the series watch a number of unlucky events from her life, private defeats and failures, which led her to death, while from the very beginning nobody has illusions as to a different end of the story.

⁶ Cfr. Latour, B., *A prologue in form of a dialog between a Student and his (somewhat) Socratic Professor*. Edited by: C. Avgerou, C. Ciborra, F. F. Land. [in:] *The Social Study of Information and Communication Study* (2004), pp. 62-76.

⁷ See. Johnson, C.B. 2014. *Modernity without project. Essay on the Void Called Contemporary*, New York, Punctum Books.

⁸ See. Virilio, P. and Lotringer, S. 2005. *The Accident of Art*, trans. M. Taormina, New York, Semiotext[e].

Failures and death in the digital world

The postdigital aesthetics fetishizes visual errors, defects and imperfections from which the digital culture wanted to free us at any price. One of the most important artistic trends realized therein is *glitch art*, i.e. art which highlights disturbances, uses digital errors, prefers a bad quality of image and its disintegration, the so-called pixelization. The creators using the phenomenon of *glitch* are happy about the defects instead of crying and grieving over their subsequent results, actually they cause them to exist in order to make happen the creative potential connected with the destructive actions⁹. The negativity of the postdigital art consist first of all in highlighting the creative role of destruction and disintegration, and on generating distortions, which have no sense whatsoever but influence the recipients in a special way, for instance causing them to feel uneasy. The images created by disturbance shall be significant to their interpreters more due to their interaction and the achieved effect, rather than to its content, sense or representation.

Rosa Menkman claims that within *glitch art* we can distinguish between two kinds of artistic actions. The first one consists in evoking the real defect (*pure glitch*), creating the real danger for the proper work and subsequent life of a digital device, which in extreme circumstances leads to death¹⁰. The other way to introduce a defect into the space of art is its simulation and emulation (*glitch-alike*), which brings no real danger. In this case it is only about the aesthetic processing of an image which makes the spectators have the impression that something went wrong, something failed while everything is all right and nobody is jeopardized.

In the first case, the artists confront us with the real defect, painful failure, drawing our attention to the materiality and mortality of the digital medium, about which one could think only in the postdigital era. They refer to the natural cycle of life of machines, which – like life creatures – have their beginning and ending, and are born in order to die¹¹. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) is perhaps one of the first but definitely the most dramatic vision of death of a computer, which starts a serious discussion over the problem of infallibility of

⁹ Cfr. Betancourt, M. 2017. *Glitch art in theory and practice*, New York, Focal Press, p. 7.

¹⁰ Cfr. Menkman, R 2011. *Network Notebooks 4: The Glitch Moment(um)*, Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, p. 35.

¹¹ A very interesting exhibition *Une archeologie des media* in the context of mortality of computers and the dawn of the digital world took place in the Second Nature w Aix-en-Provence (19.05–28.06.2015) <http://www.secondenature.org/-Archeologiedes-Media-.html> (access: 19.04.2017). One of the rooms reminded of hospital or operation theatre, where there were dying computers: some of them passed away during the exhibition.

calculation machines. When the astronauts realize that the perfect super computer HAL 9000 on the spaceship stops working properly, they decide to deactivate it. Once the machine finds it out, it proves to have a strong instinct for self-preservation and tries at any price to avoid the death penalty. In order to protect itself, it is able to devote even the lives of the passengers of the spaceship.

After the struggle with the desperately fighting HAL, Doctor David Bowman decides to disconnect it from power. The computer gets to understand that it is doomed to be destructed and goes on to beg its assassin for mercy: „Dave, please stop. Stop. Dave stop. Dave, please stop. Stop it Dave”. The pleas are all in vain, so the cornered HAL decides to talk about its fears and emotional states: „I’m scared. I’m scared, Dave. Dave, my brain disappears. I can feel it. It’s for sure. I can feel it. I can feel it. I can feel it. I’m scared....”. HAL is about to die and his memory to be deleted, so it protects itself with its last strength: it recalls its first memory, its own birth on January 12, 1992 in Urbana, Illinois. Trying to manage its growing fear of death approaching, it starts to sing a song about love taught to it by the programmer. The voice of the singing HAL gets gradually distorted and stratified, becomes and undergoes a number of deformations till it finally becomes silent and the computer dies. The spectators are aware that they are being witnesses of the first *glitches* in the history of the cinema.

The postdigital art shows us the human face of computers, it introduces us to the world of machines, which fail, get old and die before our eyes. Obviously, this process can take place slowly and naturally, but most often is speeded up by the defect-hungry artistic creators. It is worth mentioning about the artistic and aggressive actions of group 5VOLTCORE, who use technique *circuitbending*¹². By manipulating with voltage, the artists evoke a number of short circuits within the body of a computer (*hardware*), which – during such tortures – generates various unpredictable and unexpected images. *Glitch art* would consist in sharing with the viewers the images of digital machines just before they die, the images brought out shortly before its death¹³. Being treated inhumanly by the artists, the tormented computers generate non-human visions of the digital world falling apart in the inevitable catastrophe.

Glitch art: Spoil! Destroy! Distort!

¹² Cfr. Menkman, R. 2011. *Network Notebooks 4: The Glitch Moment(um)*, op.cit., p. 37.

¹³ See. Rancière, J. 2006. *The Politics Of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and introd. G. Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum.

The first and more conservative type of *glitch art* described by Menkman concerns rather the artistic interventions into space *hardware*. Some of Cory Arcangel's works could be also included in this movement. For instance *HITACHI P42H01U Plasma Burn* of 2007 depicts an inscription presented for too long on a plasma TV screen which leads to a permanent, irremovable burnt out of the message in it. The creators of *glitch art* are aware that they are able to avoid neither accident nor defect nor catastrophe in their lives, but they can safely survive only in the world of art, were errors and making mistakes constitute artistic value or device. Not only do the postdigital artists perform deadly actions inside computers. They are also interested in activities in space *software*, like killing websites, creating frustrating computer games which cannot be completed or blogs, where the human language gets mingled with non-human ones used for programming, for example with code ASCII¹⁴.

According to the previously set principles, the characteristic feature of the postdigital aesthetics is its hybrid-like nature, for instance the conscious usage of analog culture in a way as if the latter belonged to the digital order. Two more artists are worth mentioning since, in their works, they definitely put this postulate into effect and in the division proposed by Menkman are included in the other type of *glitch art*. One of them is Andy Denzler. Thanks to his characteristic strokes of brush, his paintings lead to blur of images. The artist creates the effect of *fast forward* perfectly known from the VHS tapes. By means of applied disruptions, Denzler's art displays first of all the anachronic medium with its subordinated content of the painting. Another interesting creator exhibiting the aesthetics of defect in the applied art is the Italian architect and designer Ferruccio Laviani. In 2013, he created a collection of furniture called *Good vibrations*¹⁵, achieving an amazing, and at the same time disturbing effect. The fronts of the wardrobes designed by Laviani look in reality exactly as if they were digitally distorted (*databending*), deformed by a strong tremor or rocking.

The phenomenon of databending has become so inspiring, if not fashionable, that it is hard to imagine contemporary culture which would prefer a clear message and would consciously avoid disturbances drawing our attention. Thus *glitch* becomes a common aesthetic choice, overused style or a popular visual effect, more and more appropriated also by the capitalist economy. The aesthetics simulating defect (*glitch-alike*) suspends the division into the old and the new since every novelty shows evidence of imperfection, pixelation. The way new products are advertised for is changing too. For instance, a video

¹⁴ In this kind of actions, the leader is a Dutch and Belgian duet called Jodi, made up by Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans.

¹⁵ <http://www.laviani.com/good-vibrations> (access:19.04.2017).

promoting the newest smartphone in the market, i.e. the token of the contemporary available technology, on purpose applies a bad quality font, which after appearing on the screen, instantly falls apart and disappears¹⁶. Only a few years ago, the producers of new technologies would have avoided the combination of a product being introduced onto the market with disintegration and imperfection. Today, defect has become an inseparable and commonly approved – if not desired - component of the postdigital reality.

¹⁶ <https://www.theverge.com/2017/4/18/15328968/samsung-galaxy-s8-review-s8-plus> (access: 19.04.2017).